

INTERVIEW WITH MAUREEN CONNELLY

PAGE 1

Q: Good afternoon. Today is March 1st, 2018. My name is Dorothea Black and I am here at Newton City Hall with Maureen Connelly. Today we are together participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that's being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. And I'm so glad that you came in and that we're talking together. You've been a Newton resident for a long time.

A: For a long time, all my life. Which is at this point 80 years.

Q: So you were born in 1937. And which village have you lived in?

A: I've always lived in Newton Centre, the same house.

Q: The same house for 80 years, that's very special. What are your very earliest memories of living in Newton?

A: Oh my. That's kind of hard to say, of course...one's first memories of course are the family and then as you get a little bit older it starts expanding out of the house and with neighbors and what all. I suppose some of the earliest ones are being friends with the little girl that grew up next door when she was, and I were about one and a half. Then, of course when one starts school, again your experiences with Newton expand, grow.

Q: Which school did you attend?

A: Schools...I started at the Rice School and then, that was kindergarten, first grade, and then moved on to the old Mason School from two to six and then on to Weeks, then on to Newton High School. All of the schools have virtually gone out of existence. Weeks is the only building left. It's now of course senior housing. So that's that's one big change that I've seen in Newton over the years.

INTERVIEW WITH MAUREEN CONNELLY

PAGE 2

Q: Many changes. In your childhood years what were some of the activities that kids used to do for fun?

A: I think when we were...elementary school, there was a lot of just playing together with the neighborhood children, pickup...it wasn't all adult organized team sports and whatever. Even when we got into Junior High School that wasn't the case either. It was in High School, it was the school that organized and wasn't, excuse me, it wasn't the parents or whatever, the soccer and whatever that goes on now. So we would play softball or tag football, hide-and-go-seek. Love to play hide-and-go-seek in the dark in the neighborhood. And of course the girls could play with their dolls and you know sometimes we could con the guys into joining us and doing something with that. Played a lot of board games. And I can think back on the winter days we'd be outside playing, you know, in the snow, making snow houses, having snowball fights, sledding, whatever. And then coming back in, thawing out, and we'd have ongoing Monopoly games, the board was always set up and you just keep right on playing. And that was one game of course. And, yeah, roller-skated around...there was not so much traffic so you felt safe sledding down the hill, riding your bike to the Centre or to the Highlands or to the closest little shopping areas for me. And you know we could walk around, be out, sometimes the houses on the street weren't even locked and you could, the kids could go from one house to the other and it was, you know, welcome and all.

Q: Sounds like there were lots of children.

A: Quite a few, but there were four houses in a row and that I grew up with. And there were, how many of us? Seven or eight of us and we were just good friends. And got a chance to, you know--boys and girls--do a lot of stuff together.

Q: Could you walk into Newton Centre on your own when you got old enough?

A: Yes, we would walk to school a lot. It was wartime and nobody was driving because you couldn't get gas a lot and tires were rationed. So we would walk. Early, I would say kindergarten, first grade probably a parent would escort us back and forth. But by the time we got into second and on, one of the older kids in the neighborhood was usually with us and then of course we became the older children and we made it on our own or rode a bike.

Q: Do you remember what Newton Centre was like when you were a child, what the businesses were?

A: Yes, yes. I do. I think that Newton Centre had at least two grocery stores, two hardware stores, of course the banks were there. They had a five-and-dime, Woolworth's five-and-dime. At some point Parke Snow's, the department store, was there. Some women's dress clothes, a menswear place, gift shops, antique places. It was...a car dealership was there. I want to say there was a movie theater, but I'm not quite sure about that one. Restaurants too, of course, all family restaurants. There was Kennedy's butter and egg place. Just lots of stuff. A candy store where you could watch them dipping the chocolates. And...yeah, a lot of different types of stores were there.

Q: It sounds like you never had to leave Newton Centre.

A: No, between, because I'm sort of equidistant between the Highlands and the Centre, between those two, within walking distance or easy drive if you had lots of bundles to carry, you were pretty well covered with everything that you needed.

Q: Were there...there must have been the trolley, the T?

A: No, no. My father worked in downtown Boston and what is the D-line was a...sort of a spur line of New York, New Haven and Hartford railroad. And they would have, the big steam

engines would come through, especially during commuter time. And also Railway Express came into Newton Centre.

Q: And did they come to the same train station that's there now?

A: Absolutely, because those were built when the line was established, in, oh, late, I would say sometime mid- to late-1800's, 1890's rather. So yeah, it's the same stations right along the line.

Q: So many things have changed. What about your street from then to now and the houses on your on your street?

A: They've remained pretty much the same.

Q: Oh, interesting.

A: There was just one house that I can think of that had a little bigger change where they bumped it out to the back, so the front of the house looks exactly the same. It's sort of a Tudor-y neighborhood. There were two builders that built up this community in the late 20's. And the Tudors were all built by one man and the others by whatever. I live on a small street, there are only about seven or eight houses on it, so it's...whatever. But the streets are all named after characters in Ivanhoe--Rowena, Rotherwood, Athelstane, Locksley, Cedric.

Q: I never noticed that. Has your house had other owners besides your family?

A: No.

Q: What brought your parents to Newton?

A: My father and his first wife had been living in Dorchester. And they came--they decided they wanted to move out. Why, he never never said why it was he wanted to move out of the area where he was. And so they bought this, it was a new development, it was...there was a commuter rail for him to get into Boston for his work. And so it was just a nice change for them.

Q: Can you tell me, is there any particular place still existing or not that has been important to you? Or any variety of those places?

A: Not really. I can think of one in Newton Centre, it wasn't really necessarily important but it's still there, and that's the horse trough on the corner of Centre and Beacon Street. Because when I was growing up it was still a horse trough. And one of my classmates' father had a team of horses that he did hauling. He worked for...hauling stuff for Railway Express, for one thing, from where the train left the stuff off and to an office on, I think it was on Sumner. And also he did hayrides and sleigh rides around, through which you know is Webster Wood.

Q: And so the horses would come and drink out of this trough in Newton Centre, and it's still there.

A: It's still there. Now it's a big flower pot.

Q: It doesn't have a plaque to identify it?

A: I don't really recall, now that you mention it. I don't remember.

Q: What about special events, any particular holiday events in Newton or other things that you remember?

A: I suppose one of the first...not necessarily holiday events, but big event, was I was in the second grade and in the classroom, with the teacher we were doing something and the custodian of Mason School came into the classroom and told the teacher that the war in Europe was over. And we were sent home. Well that was the first announcement and that was not a correct one. The really real one came a little bit later, I've forgotten exactly how many days, whatever. But, so that was--I can remember being so impressed that my teacher was crying. So that was that was sort of a big deal.

Q: A happy time.

A: Yeah, yeah. And then I remember when I was in Weeks they had the dedication for Oak Hill Village and I was marching in the Weeks' band at the time, over toward the Village. They had a ceremony there which I totally don't remember, but...

Q: What year would that have been, do you know?

A: I should remember. I think...it was Junior High, I was in the seventh grade at the time. So I can't, you know I have to really do some fast thinking on it, but yeah. It was very early teen, maybe 12, 13 years old.

Q: Now you mentioned that the buildings for most of your schools no longer exist.

A: That's right.

Q: And you went to all different--were they in the same location as the current schools?

A: No. No. Rice and Mason now, they joined forces and they're back on the back corner of Newton Centre playground. And of course Newton High School, a few years after I

graduated in '55, they built South. So then it became North and South. But they still had the three old buildings from Newton, the original Newton High School. And then those were torn down and they built the one that was over on Lowell Street and then they tore that down and build the one that's where it is now. Weeks is the only building still standing, but that was converted as I said before into senior housing. And they took out--it was in the shape of a W, and they took out the center part of the W, which was the gym and auditorium and locker room area of the school, and that now is a little...it's not a park, but they have tables and chairs, umbrella and whatever and that's one of the main entrances to Weeks now.

Q: Starting with elementary school, how was the building different from what the buildings are like now, and do you remember some of the things that you did in school? What it was like?

A: The buildings were old when I was there. I think Newton, I mean, Mason School probably was built sometime in the mid to late 1800's and Rice, I don't know when that was, but it was an old wooden building, creaky wooden floors, I remember those. And no gym, no fancy--no auditorium, whatever. I can remember being there, I remember the names of all of my teachers all the way through, up until Junior High School and then they start to get a little bit foggy. But having the air raid drills, where we'd have to go down into the basement, where the large restrooms were. I can remember playing little round games in kindergarten and singing the songs that all little kids at that age will sing. And then learning to write and struggling with--because I'm left-handed--struggling with the dip pen and trying to learn to write with the ink and steel point pen. And in Mason School the activities expanded. We didn't have--still no gym, but where the parking lot, in that triangular area in Newton Centre between Beacon and Langley, it's now a parking lot, it was sort of a play yard for us. And at some time the woman who was in charge of physical education for the elementary schools in Newton and our teachers would lead us over to Newton Centre playground and we would have games and things down there. We started doing like little field trips to the fire station because we could walk

easily to the Newton Centre fire station. And there was an auditorium, so then of course we had plays and did little concerts. They had a school orchestra at Mason School. Science fair started coming in, and by the time we got to sixth grade there were three teachers and we had to change classes. This was in prep for moving on to Junior High School where you had to change for every subject, so that was...

Q: And you played an instrument?

A: I played the clarinet at that time, yeah.

Q: Do you remember a favorite teacher or teachers?

A: Oh, golly. Not favorite teachers, but I really liked most all of the teachers, particularly in the Elementary level. And there were some that in Junior High School and High School also that were memorable. One of my English teachers in High School, we remained friends for...well, just up until shortly before she died at 90-something or other. So, you know, it was a nice connection and I was very fond of her.

Q: Have there been any difficulties, either past or present, to living in Newton?

A: The hardest one now is being a senior and living in a home with the city expenses rising. And I can't see how that's going to change. I always think my father said when he first moved there it was Mayor Childs and he reduced the property taxes at one point during his tenure as Mayor here in Newton. Those days are long gone. Those days are long gone. But that's probably the hardest...the hardest also is that there's no real supermarket in Newton Centre or Newton Highlands, and if you want to do shopping you really need to have a car and go off, be able to

drive your car and go off too. It's--that's a little tough, but that's...I think that's a change in lifestyle where--that right across the board everywhere that the mom-and-pop stores are few and far between, and you can't go into the little grocery store and buy everything anymore. It's hard.

Q: There have been so many changes. Are there any other big changes that come to mind in Newton over the years?

A: Well, in Newton Centre...there's very little in my lifestyle that I can shop there. It's more the banking, a lot of hairdressers, whatever, fast-food places coming in more and more. And not so much, you know, the everyday whatever's. It's...the library is gone, so that was...the branch libraries, that was another big part of being in the Newton villages, was every village had its little library, and it was wonderful. It got the kids in. And so that...yeah. But a lot of changes. There was, within my neighborhood, it was a lot of not so much interaction with your neighbor anymore. But that's beginning to change, thankfully. And that there is more of an effort for the neighbors to be concerned more with one another and to be helpful again as it used to be. It's more of a feeling of neighborhood, I think.

Q: That's good news.

A: Yeah.

Q: In Newton Centre--there's so many different villages and different flavors in Newton. Does anything come to mind about Newton Centre that's distinctive, that's special? Or how being a resident of that village has--what perspective that's given you on Newton?

A: I don't think so. I don't know how I would describe it to somebody else. Of course there are elements that remain the same, the same only different. But you know, it's like, the churches are still there, the edifices are still there. There's some changes in terms of denomination and

whatnot, but no, I can't...I really can't say that there is any one particular thing that...I don't know how I would describe it. You know it's definitely an upmarket, upscale area. But it does have access to public transportation, it's got the lake, and schools. Again, a good hike to Bowen or to Mason Rice. And depending on where the kids will be going...

Q: Actually another special place in Newton comes to mind. Norumbega, was that still there when you were...?

A: Oh yeah. Oh absolutely. Yes, yes. I had a chance to go there when it was the amusement park. The little ferris wheel, merry-go-round. Bear pit, the canoes, the Penny Arcade type of thing. And then of course there was a McManus ice-cream place just on the outside of the park, and also the totem pole, which I never got to know as the dancehall thing. And it was a very nice, well controlled, lovely place, a safe place for youngsters to go. But, yeah, it was...yeah, that was in existence for a long, long time. I think there used to be a trolley line that ran from Boston down Comm Avenue, in that center parkway between the carriage route and Comm Ave. And its endpoint was at Norumbega park.

Q: Are there any other places in the other villages of Newton that you remember going to when you were younger?

A: My father loved trains, loved to travel by train, and in his work he did a lot of traveling in Central America with--couldn't take the train, but his busman's holiday was traveling. So because he liked trains so much, and when I was three, four, five, he would take me over to Riverside, where the trains would come through, and we would stand and wait for the train to come through and wave to the conductor, and the porters, whatever, as it went streaming by.

Q: How exciting.

A: Yeah, it was nice. I enjoyed it. I enjoy train travel, or I did, haven't been for years.

Q: Have--were there other family outings? Like, did you ever go out to restaurants for dinner in Newton...or ice cream?

A: I don't remember so much going out to eat in Newton, except maybe to Brigham's in Newton Highlands. And that was a thing that my mother enjoyed doing, and she would take me down down there.

Q: When was that, do you remember?

A: All the way up until...I think it was probably gone by the time I was in high school. And then there was--they took, had a place in Newtonville. But yeah, that was...you know, the big ice cream sundaes with the hot fudge dripping over the sides of the silver dish and whatnot. And I never liked ice cream, so it was--for me I always would have a raspberry lime rickey, that was my favorite thing at Brigham's actually.

Q: How would you describe Newton to someone who had never seen it before? Maybe in your travels...

A: It would be...a city that has some diversity to it, an increasing diversity now probably than when I was growing up, with 13 villages that each had its--and still has to some extent, their own special...specialness, I guess one could say, about it. And it has public transportation, it has recreational opportunities, the lake, used to be skating at Bullough's Pond and Crystal, but they haven't frozen over for years. And that there's shopping, malls fairly close by, opportunities, good educational system still. Just what you would like. All you need is a little bit of money. And I think that that's one big change in Newton, is that I think that the prices of homes and the prices of living have really gone up a great deal and unfortunately I think it's squeezing out

a lot of people that are middle-class or those that need lower income housing opportunities. It's not there anymore.

Q: Would you say that when you were young there was more economic diversity amongst the families?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Well there are so many things that you have seen. Can you--are there any other particular things that you would like to talk about that we haven't covered?

A: Well, I kind of thought about this before I came over and it's, you know it's hard to kind of condense it all down. A little bit is I suppose each phase of schooling has its own little memories. I think that...you know, I have wonderful, wonderful memories of things that happened in high school, amusing memories of what happened in high school. One in particular where when we started having gym in junior high school, we had to get a gym outfit, which was a one-piece green thing with bloomer legs, buttoned up the front. And this lasted until you were a senior in high school. Well by the--from the time I was a seventh grader until I was a twelfth grader, of course I grew somewhat. Some of the girls could hardly stand up in these uniforms because they were the same one that they got when they were in the seventh grade. And I can see this one gym class in particular--they tried to expose you to all kinds of activities, be it team sport, individual sport, rhythmic activities, and so on--they decided that they would teach us tap dancing, and we had to go out and buy furniture coasters which we nailed into the bottom of our sneakers. And we went to, into the gym and there may be, you know, 40 odd girls in this class, maybe more, with these green gym outfits. Sometimes the elastic on the bottom of a leg had gone and that would be hanging down to the girls knees, sometimes the belt was missing, so it was an interesting group and we would have to do this tap dance, and it was to three blind mice. And the

ending of it is *bumbum*, and the gym floor would vibrate. It was--I've often thought, you know, I'm sorry they didn't take pictures of that, because it was just really, really something.

Q: You've never forgotten it.

A: No. Absolutely not. And thinking about this I was...experience here, I was trying to see what mementos I had of my class days, and throughout the Newton Schools, and I came across the old gym suit, so...[laughter]

Q: Is it tattered and... [laughter]

A: No, not too bad. I don't know...I may foist it off on the Newton Historical Society at some point.

[Laughter]

Q: And so girls and boys were separate of course in gym, probably you didn't even have gym in elementary.

A: No, we didn't. We would play joint...together, red rover come over, kickball, those types of things, mixed group. And then...excuse me...by the time we got into junior high school, the boys had their gym classes, and the girl said their gym classes. It was of an era where the girls really couldn't have track and field because girls just weren't able to do that kind of thing. And, yeah. And girls' basketball was...we couldn't run the full length of the court because it was too much for girls. [Laughter] I don't even think our phys-ed teachers believed that. But anyway, that was what the rules were in those days.

Q: So no sports teams for girls...

INTERVIEW WITH MAUREEN CONNELLY

PAGE 14

A: Yes. We had softball, field hockey, and archery, and soccer, as I believe, yes. Basketball, they had girls' basketball too, it was just a different game than the way the boys played it.

Q: And other clubs? You had your band...

A: In junior high school, yes. Band was the only other thing I remember, I think they probably had other clubs. They--we had a little newspaper, some students got together and they formed a bank in Weeks, and by the time we got to high school of course, you know the opportunities just opened up. You know they had art clubs and vocal groups of various kinds, mixed chorus, girls' chorus, boys' chorus, whatever, band, orchestra, dance band, all this--all the sport clubs, a lot of drama, spring musical every year which was great fun to get involved in. Many, many opportunities.

Q: Well it looks like we have to stop. This has been fascinating. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW